

Rabbit, duck, or dabbit? The *Odyssey's* dual perspective

James Miller

On first reading, the *Odyssey* might seem like a classic tale of the good guy winning through and the bad guys getting their come-uppance. But James Miller argues here that if we read more carefully we find all sorts of ways in which Odysseus is himself likened to the baddies whom he confronts.

Is Odysseus a duck or a rabbit? Wittgenstein famously used a drawing which, depending on how you look at it, might be the head of either a rabbit or a duck to illustrate the way in which the same thing can be interpreted as two completely different things depending upon who looks, how they look, and what they expect to see. So in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus can be seen as both admirable hero and despicable villain at the same time.

Take the episode in book 10 where Odysseus, having allowed all eleven of his ships other than his own to enter the harbour of the Laestrygonians and seeing them under attack, has to decide how to act:

countless numbers of powerful Laestrygonians running up from every side, more like Giants than men. Standing at the top of the cliffs they began pelting my flotilla with lumps of rock... I drew my sword from my hip [dramatic pause?], slashed through the hawser of my blue-prowed vessel, and shouted to my crew to bend to their oars.

(book 10. 118–30)

As Odysseus draws his sword he evokes the warrior hero of Troy; we expect to see him fight for his men and attack the Laestrygonians. In fact, he cuts the rope to accelerate his headlong flight. We might parallel this moment with Monty Python's Brave Sir Robin, who 'when danger reared its ugly head, bravely turned his tail and fled', but it is very hard to make this Odysseus fit with the courageous hero we see facing the suitors or Polyphemos. Or is it?

Odysseus, the Cyclops and the Suitors

Odysseus' most famous encounter in the *Odyssey* (book 9) is with the Cyclops Polyphemos: a one-eyed giant, described as being like a 'peak in the hills' and capable of moving rocks even 'twenty-two waggons' could not shift, quite 'unlike men who eat bread'.

After landing on the Cyclopes' island Odysseus and his men go into Polyphemos' cave, help themselves to some cheese and, though they contemplate taking some of the kids and lambs they find there, Odysseus decides instead to wait for the gifts to which the Greek conventions of hospitality and gift exchange entitle him. Sadly the brutal and barbaric Cyclops laughs at the supplication, and smashes the heads of Odysseus' men like puppies on the floor, before he eats them raw like a 'mountain lion'.

At first sight this is a conflict between polar opposites: the intelligent, pious, physically weak, civilized man against a barbaric brute. The Cyclopes explicitly lack even the basic technical ability to sail to the island of goats and colonize it (as the Greeks were doing all around the Mediterranean during much of the period when the *Odyssey* was being composed) or to perform the basic agriculture to grow their own food. They are monstrously strong, utterly blasphemous, and wholly incapable of matching Odysseus' intelligence.

When Odysseus eventually defeats the Cyclops it is through the use of his characteristic intelligence. He tells Polyphemos that his name is Nobody (*mētis*), so that when blinded by a red-hot, sharpened pole the agonized Polyphemos screams for help, his claims that 'Nobody's treachery' is doing him to death achieve nothing. The name *mētis* can also be read with the parts run together as *mētis* meaning cunning scheme; Polyphemos' barbaric strength is defeated

by Odysseus' Greek cunning. As Odysseus' men cower before this monster, are we not bound to accept as fitting that his cruelty comes to a pitiful end with a heated pole blazing in his eye and to be entirely behind the valiant and very clever hero as he saves his men?

The *Odyssey* will not allow this simple heroic reading: the lion simile is used of only two characters in the *Odyssey*: of Polyphemos slaughtering Odysseus' men and of Odysseus. Odysseus takes it once when it emphasizes the danger which Nausicaa might face when a naked Odysseus emerges from his bush, and a second time when he has slaughtered the 108 suitors in book 22 at the very pinnacle of his warrior prowess. The suitors appeared after Odysseus had been away for seventeen years and were pursuing his wife Penelope, his kingdom of Ithaca, and plotting death for his son Telemachus. The connection between Odysseus and Polyphemos made by this simile is one of a variety of ways in which Odysseus is identified with figures who had seemed to be his opposite.

If Odysseus is being given the position of Polyphemos, the suitors are in the position of Odysseus and his men. They too have entered another man's house unbidden and helped themselves to the property they found. Odysseus supplicated Polyphemos and was ignored; one fairly inoffensive suitor called Leodes supplicates Odysseus and is killed whilst still speaking. No matter how unpleasant they are, these suitors are in Odysseus' house as his (albeit unwelcome) guests just as much as Odysseus and his men were in Polyphemos' cave.

In death more parallels between Odysseus' men in Polyphemos' cave and the suitors are made as they too are massacred so that their blood soaks the floor. The simile used of the dead suitors being like dead fish is the same as that used of Odysseus' men lost to the Laestrygonians, but this time presumably Odysseus is the fishing Laestrygonian.

The links do not stop here. The suitors are described by Eumaeus as like pirates; Polyphemos asked Odysseus whether he and his men were pirates or traders; Odysseus denied that they were either, but readers know better since they have been

told that Odysseus has just sacked the city of Ismarus and he goes on to give Polyphemus wine he took from a priest as a ransom.

Odysseus emerges from the text of the *Odyssey* as a dual figure, both the opposite of the suitors and monsters and at the same time very much one of them.

The Trojan Horse

The same double representation can be seen in the tale of Troy, which the as-yet-unrecognised Odysseus requests the bard Demodocus to sing. As this episode is sung, Odysseus weeps. We might guess that he weeps because happy to hear his own fame, or that he weeps for his friends, but the simile of his weeping conveys a different story. Odysseus weeps,

as a woman weeps when she throws her arms round the body of her beloved husband, fallen in battle in the defence of his city and his comrades, fighting to save his city and his children from the evil day. She has found him gasping in the throes of death; she clings to him wailing and lamenting. But the enemy come up and beat her back and shoulders with spears, as they lead her off into slavery and a life of miserable toil, with her cheeks wasted by her pitiful grief.

(book 7. 520–35)

The moment of which Odysseus is most proud, and which he most wants his Phaeacian hosts to have immediately in mind when a mere seventy lines later he eventually reveals his name to them, is one which has had the most horrific consequences. This Odysseus is both war-hero and cause of immense human tragedy. But the simile must also bring to mind Penelope hearing of the suitors' plan to kill Telemachus in book 4:

Penelope was overwhelmed by the anguish that racked her. She could not even bear to sit on one of the many chairs in her apartments, but sank down on the threshold of her lovely room, weeping bitterly, while all the maids of her household, young and old, stood round her sobbing.

'Listen, my friends,' she said between her sobs. 'Is there a woman of my time whom Zeus has treated worse than me? I had a husband years ago, the best and bravest of the Danaans, a lion-hearted man, famous from Hellas to the heart of Argos. That husband I have lost. And now the whirlwinds have snatched my darling son from the house.'

(book 4. 715–25)

The weeping woman brings to mind for attentive listeners those women who have suffered in Odysseus' pursuit of *kleos* (glory). This passage hardly endorses that pursuit; rather, it shows its cost. But we must remember that it was Odysseus who asked for the story and Odysseus who weeps.

Odysseus and the underworld

Odysseus' journey into Hades provokes similar questions. When Odysseus tells of his meeting with Heracles we see how close the two heroes are. Odysseus already told the Phaeacians that other than Philoctetes he was the best archer at Troy and that he yields place only to Heracles and Eurytus amongst the dead. The bow and arrows will be wholly bound up with the way Odysseus retakes his position in Ithaca, reveals his identity, and kills his enemies. As Heracles says he was helped by Athene and Hermes, so is Odysseus; Heracles visited Hades alive as now does Odysseus, and both are working out a miserable doom. But Heracles is a strange figure who wears a terrible belt depicting scenes of 'bloodshed and the massacre of men... a masterpiece that should never have been made' (book 11. 612). The massacre of men as an horrific sight can only resonate with Odysseus' slaughter of suitors: Odysseus, we will learn in book 21, got the bow from Iphitus who was a victim of Heracles' vicious abuse of hospitality...

For Heracles killed him [Iphitus] in his own house, though he was Iphitus' host, caring no more in that cruel heart of his for the vengeful eye of the gods than for the hospitality he had given him – feasted the man first, then killed him.

(book 21. 26–9)

The uses of ambivalence

How are we to explain why Homer has seen to it that Odysseus is at once the Heroic Rabbit and the Villainous Duck, not just a muddled mixture, not a Dabbit? One might be tempted to think that some of the contradiction stems from the process of oral composition, whereby epic episodes were passed by word of mouth and memory down the centuries. Or, given the narrative need to swiftly remove eleven of Odysseus' twelve ships, a Laestrygonian-like episode had to take place and the possibilities of Odysseus' reaction were perhaps once explored in changing ways, leaving a footprint in the sword and the severed hawser.

But the presentation of Odysseus to recall the very worst aspects of Polyphemus and the Laestrygonians, even as he stands in polar opposition to them,

cannot simply be a product of the compositional history of the *Odyssey*. Something of the same ambivalence about the epic hero is on display in the links with the *Iliad*. Take the famous meeting between Achilles and Odysseus in Hades:

'But you, Achilles, are the most fortunate man that ever was or will be! For in the old days when you were on Earth, we Argives honoured you as though you were a god; and now, down here, you have great power among the dead. Do not grieve at your death, Achilles.'

'And do not you make light of death, illustrious Odysseus,' he replied. 'I would rather work the soil as a serf on hire to some landless impoverished peasant than be King of all these lifeless dead.'

(book 11. 483–91)

The heroism and death that Achilles chose in the *Iliad*, and that Odysseus appears to envy, have lost their savour, and the peaceful death in old age of Odysseus foretold by the prophet Teiresias seems very distant. The *Odyssey* is uncomfortable with the heroic ideals of the *Iliad* and Odysseus when most Iliadic is also most disturbingly dual, both Heroic Rabbit and Villainous Duck. It is these very difficulties in the *Odyssey* that make it endlessly rewarding to read.

James Miller teaches Classics at Durham Sixth Form Centre and since first being introduced to the Odyssey by A. McClure at Bromsgrove has found it repays endless rereading. He got the idea for this article from a lecture by Emma Smith on Henry V. You can find further exploration of some of the issues discussed here in Peter Walcot's article on the Phaeacians, 'Entertaining Strangers', in Omnibus 21 (January 1991), 7–9.